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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study which examined the effectiveness of explicit instruction in English intonation in listening tasks in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) course taught to four Japanese high school students. The students' exposure to real-world English listening situations had been limited, and the majority were focusing more on grammar in their preparation for university entrance examinations. Initially, instruction took a bottom-up approach, beginning with phoneme-level pronunciation practice without analysis of the communicative value of intonation choices. Later in the course, pronunciation instruction was top-down, focusing on production in minimal contexts, questions, and syllables. A decision was made to concentrate on yes-no and wh- questions in listening instruction, teaching students how to diacritically mark intonation in these contexts. Over a period of several weeks, it was found that the students had significant difficulty in distinguishing between grammatical and discourse considerations in their listening. It is suggested that the theoretical constructs of key and termination be used as starting points for moving beyond grammatical boundaries in classroom listening instruction. (Appendixes include a classroom worksheet and a questionnaire. (Contains 19 references.) (MSE)

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DISCOURSE INTONATION IN LISTENING TASKS

WITH YES/NO QUESTIONS

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BY

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A FORWARD ABOUT THE MODEL OF INTONATION USED IN THE PAPER

Intonation in the paper is understood to be the model of discourse intonation attributed to Brazil (1997). To oversimplify for sake of brevity, this model maintains that a meaning opposition is available to the speaker either to denote some of the message as "already belonging to the common ground" or being outside it and therefore to present it as "an expansion of the common ground" (Hewings 1995:252). The first opposition is signalled by a rising tone (either rising or falling-rising). This is marked "r" in the paper. The second opposition is signalled by a falling tone (either falling or rising-falling). It is marked "p".

There are three other terms which are referred to in the paper: prominence, key, and termination. The discourse intonation model assumes a three-pitch system of relative pitch height. High, medium, and low choices are available to the speaker. A prominent syllable, one that is heard as louder than the syllables around it, is subject to the three-pitch system. Key and termination are found within a tone unit, a segment of speech which has discernible status. The first prominent syllable a speaker produces is referred to as key. Termination, then, is the choice associated with the last prominent syllable (Brazil 1997:6-11).

The model of intonation also accounts for intonation across speakers. For this, the first speaker's low-termination permits a choice of high-key, mid-key, or low-key for the other (Brazil 1997:117-131). Low termination "projects no expectation that the

response will begin with a particular key choice" (Brazil 1997:119). Students' ability to hear the difference between termination and key in some contexts is one of the more important findings discussed in the paper.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE GROUP

Four seventeen-year old high school students study for fifty minutes a week. The class is designed for speaking and listening skills to be focused on. The three male students have an additional ninety-minute lesson each week which concentrates solely on grammar for written examinations. The grammar lesson is conducted in L1 (Japanese).

The four have never travelled outside Japan. Their use of English has been limited to classrooms (author's data, all author's data taken from audio tape recordings of classes). In terms of oral production and listening skills they are able to do the tasks asked of them in the course adequately. There is little variation among the members of the group in terms of speaking and listening ability.

The absence of real-world situations has meant that exposure to rich sources of intonation has been limited. The fact that three of them study English grammar in order to prepare for written university entrance exams points to a conclusion that intonation has not been a primary concern in their previous studies. My decision to bring intonation into focus in listening tasks, therefore stems mostly from this absence of real-world intonation use.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I shall first examine some issues I had to address in regard to how to focus on intonation in the classroom. There were, as far as I could determine, two possible starting points: One, the bottom which is often referred to as the phoneme level; Two, the top which is easily referred to as the intonation level. After the paper discusses the reasons a "top-down approach" (larger elements of speaking such as utterances which often have a wash back effect on lower levels such as phonemes) was chosen to be implemented in the classroom, the paper gives an account of methodological decisions I made before and during the formal introduction of intonation in the classroom.

To evaluate the outcomes of the theoretical and methodological decisions I made, a process of action research was begun. The action research process is focused on whether students will accept studying discourse intonation during listening tasks. In a previous course the present group reported that vocabulary and listening were their main concerns for the upcoming course (author's data). The first problem addressed was how to introduce intonation to a group that had shown no prior knowledge of or interest in the topic.

THE BENEFITS OF A TOP DOWN APPROACH IN THE CLASSROOM

The book used with the group; Interchange 1 (Richards 1996), starts with a traditional approach to pronunciation. Sound units such as phonemes (e.g. the phonemes /s/ and /z/ and /iz/ in English allow for contrasts such as Miss, Ms. and Mrs.) are

prominent in the early units. The phonemic material is usually presented on the cassette which accompanies the coursebook. The approach taken in the course has been phoneme level practice without analysis of the communicative value of intonation choices. An example of this approach follows.

One aspect of a bottom-up approach is elision, which traditionally does not focus on the referring and proclaiming tones in which it can take place. Elision (Brown 1977:57), a process in which phonemes from citation forms are not produced, causes problems for my students in listening tasks. Even with oral and listening practice the group does not often produce examples of elision in their own production in class. Example one illustrates this. In a role play situated in a department store with two pens on the table, the student says the following:

I want to buy this pen

A version of this in naturally occurring discourse would have some elision taking place with "I want to" therefore losing the "t" phoneme before the word "to" (Roach 1991:127-128)

Bottom-up practice ignores the clear fact that the student's words contain no grammatical errors. The primary problem with the student's utterance is, I propose, the lack of any intended intonation. Brown (Brown 1994:260) argues against a bottom-up focus and suggests "our goals as teachers of English pronunciation

should,.. more realistically be focused on **clear, comprehensible pronunciation"** [emphasis in the original]. That is, most likely, written from a BANA context (see Holliday 1994 for an explanation of BANA) but seems to be relevant for the group in the study. In the context within which the group studies it is hard to learn or acquire the communicative function of intonation in spoken discourse. Their pronunciation is clear and comprehensible yet the intended meaning of what is said is often hard to discern such as in the example above. To address this communicative problem a top-down approach is necessary.

A more communicatively accurate version of "I want to buy this pen" would have "this" as a marked syllable thereby making it more prominent in the utterance. Taylor (1993:7-8) suggests that making a syllable more prominent focuses the listener's attention on it. In the example above, the word "this" is usually prominent because it contrasts with "that" other pen the speaker does not want. The student is, of course, in a role play situation but there is still no reason to make "I want to buy" and "pen" prominent. Those facts answering who? and what? already belong to the common ground. The important distinction to be made is which pen. From such examples I determined that a top-down approach might help the group understand why intonation choices are made.

THE TOP-DOWN APPROACH IN LISTENING TASKS

Much later on in the course there is a top-down focus, though it neglects to focus on explanations choosing instead to focus on

production in minimal contexts, questions, and syllables. I decided that the framework for listening tasks should tie together communicative intonation and listening tasks. The explanation of this decision comprises this section.

Wong (Wong 1987:21) suggests that intonation merits greater priority in the teaching program than attention to individual sounds. McCarthy (McCarthy 1991:89) is even more optimistic. He maintains good intonation may have a wash back effect on articulation of phonemes. They both offer numerous suggestions for the production of intonation. Clennel (1997:123), though, is specific on how to increase attention to intonation in classroom listening tasks, which is the type of noticing activity that can be done with the group in the study. He suggests teachers should aim to develop receptive awareness of prosodic skill before practising production. He (Clennel 1997:123) also suggests getting students to mark perceptually important prosodic features.

After listening to students (author's recorded data) and reflecting on the suggestions of Taylor and Clennel, three decisions were made in regard to the group in the study. One, encourage inductive reasoning in listening tasks in order to establish the meaning of intonation choices. Two, have students mark intonation in listening tasks to help them use inductive reasoning with data in class. Three, delay production of intonation studied in class. There were still some considerations to account for. The language to be used while studying intonation, i.e., declaratives, interrogatives, or imperatives,

was still undecided, as was the exact aspect of intonation to start with. The next section discusses the reasons for choosing yes/no and wh- questions as the language to be focused on, and explains the reasons for isolating key and termination as a centre of focus.

SOME PRAGMATIC REASONS FOR CHOOSING QUESTIONS AS A FOCUS IN LISTENING TASKS

> In many classrooms children rarely ask questions
> and when they do they are mainly of the
> order 'Do we put the date'
> or 'Can I go to the lavatory'
> (Sinclair and Coulthard 1992:27)

The quotation above is an analysis of an L1 classroom for children, but it is relevant to my classroom. I ask most of the questions in class (author's data). Taking this observation into consideration, it seems worthwhile to start the study of intonation using questions because there will be numerous opportunities created by the linguistic behaviour found in the classroom, which Kumaravadivelu (1993:13-14) suggests is an appropriate macrostrategy to apply in the language classroom.

There are, however, numerous questions in spoken discourse that are difficult to recognise as such without knowledge of intonation, that is, the question is delivered in an intonational form not a syntactic form. From Tsui (Tsui:104) I have taken a useful example of a question that needs knowledge of intonation

for one to recognize it as such:

X: //p these ARE students in the ENGlish department//

H: //that's right, they're all english majors//

Speaker X uses a declarative syntactic pattern but tone choice invites Speaker H to confirm the assumption found in speaker X's declarative statement. Although the study of examples like those above serves many useful pedagogic purposes, I decided to avoid complicating the listening tasks for the group. I chose, instead, to focus on more familiar yes/no and wh-questions. There was, however, another consideration to be taken into account in regard to what kind of questions were to be used.

A further distinction should be made between display and referential questions. Display questions, questions to which the asker knows the answer, are far more common in classrooms than are referential questions, questions to which the asker does not know the answer (Nunan 1991:194). Like many teachers I ask a lot of display questions. A typical example is the following excerpt taken from lesson 3 of the action research cycle:

T://p saTOshi//p TRUE or FALSE//

S://p TRUE//

T://p GOOD//

The subscript "good" symbols low termination, the voice being in a low range compared to other tones in the exchange. Hewings (Hewings a:195) proposes that such intonation choice marks the exchange as having been completed to the teacher's satisfaction. In one lesson with the group I used low termination in most of my

display wh- and yes/no question sequences with the group (author's data). To find more examples of referential wh-questions and yes/no questions, I looked toward the coursebook and its cassette. The course cassette examples often have another utterance after low termination choices made by the second speaker. Most of the classroom examples I collected do not. There was some consideration given to using authentic materials, but at this point in the course such materials would not be as clear or as easy to follow as the course cassette. Perhaps at a later stage in the course I shall attempt more authentic input.

To promote a top-down approach in listening tasks with referential questions I decided to have the group listen and mark intonation only in yes/no and wh- questions during listening tasks as Clennel (1997) suggests. Listening tasks set out in the coursebook would have one more phase added to them in which the group would listen for and mark aspects of intonation. Kumaravadivelu (1993:13-14) advises teachers to present material in units of discourse, which should benefit learners by contextualizing the interactive effects of various linguistic components. I decided, therefore, to present intonation in units of discourse from the cassette rather than in rules that applied with random examples taken out of any retrievable context. The success of these decisions was to be judged during the action research process.

NOTICING INTONATION IN LISTENING TASKS:

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

All the best laid plans are easily misunderstood in the classroom or forgotten on the spur of the moment. To facilitate the group's effort to notice intonation in questions I decided to incorporate a process of Observe, Hypothesise, and Experiment (OHE). Lewis (Lewis 1996:10-15) suggests that this paradigm be used for a lexical perspective in the classroom. He mentions nothing about intonation but the framework has two important contributions for tasks designed for noticing intonation: One, questions in dialogues can be "highly probable sentences" which Lewis suggests should feature prominently in all language practice. Lewis suggests that using "highly probable sentences" thereby allows students to observe probable sentences (Lewis 1996:15).

Questions can then perhaps be included in this category of "highly probable sentences. Two, experimenting and hypothesizing with intonation requires activities which involve sorting, matching, identifying, and describing. These are the types of activities Lewis sees overlapping in the Hypothesise and Experiment phase.

In addition to using the OHE paradigm I am observing the group to document the following categories:

1. Incorrect intonation markings in the written task.
2. Reluctance or willingness to hypothesize.
3. Hesitation to try new contexts or vocabulary in the Experiment phase.
4. Asking other students or the teacher for help in any phase.

These categories are intended to help me uncover any difficulties

with the new listening task. If the group use all resources available, ask lots of questions, and show some willingness to hypothesize then I would feel fairly certain that the added task can be done for the remainder of the course. If the group does not exhibit any of the actions hoped for then there will be need for reflection on what types of tasks might encourage some improvement during listening tasks.

ACTION RESEARCH: EARLY DATA

In week one, I assigned an extra task in the regular listening stage. The students marked the termination of yes/no and wh- questions in the dialogue. There were no mistakes made. The students did listen to two questions three times. The students only observed intonation in this lesson. Two students were late so I was not able to move beyond the Observe phase. I ended the lesson without any explanations as to why some questions terminated higher than others, but did say in the pre-task stage that we would discuss termination during the next lesson.

In week two of the study another dialogue (Appendix A) was done in class. I assigned the same extra task during the listening stage. There were three mistakes out of a possible fifteen. One student made two errors on wh- questions marking termination high instead of low. From this point the group was asked to take some of the examples from the dialogue to try to form some kind of hypothesis from the data. The model for analysis was high-termination as opposed to low-termination. At first, the group was reluctant to advance any hypothesis. In oral interviews after the

third lesson of the action research cycle the students all mentioned that an inductive approach was unfamiliar and somewhat difficult to apply to the data. Despite the difficulty reported in retrospect one of the male students advanced the hypothesis during the lesson that wh- questions have falling intonation and yes/no questions have rising intonation. The available data contradicted his assertion. The other students quickly concurred with the erroneous assertion thereby ending the inductive phase of the lesson. After pointing out the data which contradicted the student's assertion and having no new hypotheses advanced, I decided to postpone any explanation of the communicative value of intonation in questions. A process of reflection followed my failure in the classroom.

Mann (1998: A4 page 12) suggests that using more communicative data would mean "data that do not fit." The group ignored the messy results, easily persuaded instead to adopt a grammar-based view of intonation in clear contradiction of the data listened to over two weeks of classes. Mann's analysis and the students actions led me to postpone any further sole attention to termination choice in questions.

Thompson (Thompson S. 1995:239-240) stresses that the context-dependency of English should be stressed when teaching intonation in referential questions. My attempt to have students notice termination choices lacked this element of context-dependency. Listening for termination does not encourage students to piece together the meaning behind it. I needed to formulate a

way to lead the hypothesise phase away from grammar-based descriptions which focus solely on intonation within the sentence. In classroom terms I wanted them to trust their ears more and hear and see in the text where tones point, either forwards or bacḱwards. To do this I moved towards a listening task that focused on key.

In order to maintain some continuity for the group I started the third week of the cycle with the same dialogue used in week two. The task however changed dramatically. I asked the group to determine what key was chosen at the beginning of each sentence in the dialogue. Student interest increased once I played the tape. There were requests to play the dialogue four more times. The group said the task was "too difficult." There was no hesitation though. The task presented something outside grammar-based descriptions so the students asked for some help. I suggested using the termination of the previous utterance. Termination marks made as a class did help the group mark some key choices.

The combined use of termination and key allowed the group to determine the key for nearly half of the sentences. I observed their markings in their coursebooks, but instead of correcting the numerous mistakes I asked them to hypothesize about what caused speaker B to choose rising intonation on 'oh' and 'mmm' in the following examples that had been marked correctly:

(full-length version found in Appendix A)

ex.1)

A: It's four years old.

B: //r oh//

ex.2)

A: $5200.00

B: //r mmm//

Prior to discussing in more detail the Hypothesis phase undertaken by the group it would be useful to explain more about the rising tone choice and why the question about it was posed to the group. Both examples are what Hewings (1995:257) describes as "rising tone to signal retrospective reference." Use of proclaiming tone, a falling tone, could signal that "B" is not interested any more because in ex.1 the car is too old or in ex.2 the car is too expensive. The question posed to the group was intended to help them match the rising tone with its anaphoric reference. The OHE paradigm encourages such matching exercises. For the group, matching seemed to help make connections between key and termination choices.

The group established the connection between the rising tone and the previous speakers' utterance. The group also stated during the lesson that it would be difficult to notice key choices if they had no knowledge of termination. They had been, as one would who has a done a lot work with grammar, focusing on the sentence instead of on discourse. The group also reported that a link between low-termination and high-key was easier to make than mid-termination to mid-key for example. The possibility of testing their reported listening experience with other groups for verification is an important outcome of this action research

process.

After the Hypothesize phase was completed, time ran out before the experiment phase could begin. A student did, however, at the last minute ask what an alternative falling tone would mean if used. This question began a brief Experiment phase which allowed the group to generate examples using their own vocabulary and situations. Not authentic examples, of course, but the heuristic resources (term taken from Kumaravadivelu 1993:13-14) of the group were being activated.

After the lesson proper ended the class stayed for five minutes noticeably monitoring their intonation by trying to refer to the question asked using an "r" tone while discussing plans for the weekend. It was the chance question in the hypothesize phase that created the environment in which the group felt free to experiment. The most significant part of the whole process became the linking of intonation and meaning. The students said that they enjoyed learning more about difficult aspects of intonation, key in particular, than learning about intonation in questions. When asked to explain why that was two students said that their grammar teacher gave them the rules so they did not need learn them again using data. That answer may be the cause of the trouble hypothesizing about the data during the second lesson in the action research cycle.

EVALUATION AND TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Theory:

I uncovered some data related to listening tasks and

intonation. My limited amount of research could, perhaps, point to the need to start noticing tasks outside grammatical boundaries (see Thompson S. 1995:235-243) in order to promote students' listening for key and termination between speakers. There is, of course, more research needed with other groups but this group seemed more interested in identifying and matching low-termination and high-key than other tasks in the research cycle. The theoretical constructs of key and termination proved to be excellent starting points for moving beyond grammatical boundaries in listening tasks.

Pedagogic Concerns:

As this paper discusses the first stage of research in an area not particularly well-documented I am left wondering how to do Experiment phases with classes. Using more authentic data than was used in the initial observation phases in the study would bring problems of overloading the students unless there were accurate transcriptions. Without accurate transcriptions the Observe phase might be quite difficult for a lower-level group.

The Group:

The third lesson of the cycle brought about a discernible change in the male students. Intonation choices became difficult to classify with grammar-based rules which made listening much more important. They worked together for the first time in the course. For me that is the most important outcome of the action research process. They had not shown much interest in working together but intonation tasks seem to give them a common puzzle to

solve. A paradigm shift from grammar level analysis to discourse level analysis was presented in the course of studying intonation. The group responded well to this sudden intrusion on their understanding of language and adopted a collective approach to combine their resources. Some evidence of this positive response is their agreeing to continue to spend time on intonation in class (see Appendix B). They also reported wanting to practice intonation with each other which I hope shall make it easier to focus on discourse intonation.

Conclusions:

This study could also further support Thompson's work (Thompson G. 1997) on teacher intonation. Once students have started to understand that "r" tones can have an anaphoric referent, a teacher saying //r oh// in response to students' answers should help the students understand that the "r" tone of the teacher refers back to the student who has answered the question; and therefore the teacher is not simply accepting the answer and moving on to the next student. A teacher who says //p oh// in response is probably moving onto another student. A teacher can, accordingly, use classroom examples to illustrate the difference, which students probably understand anyway but the meaning of the tone choices should be confirmed and experimented with in different contexts.

(WORD COUNT 3950)

Unit 3

10 CONVERSATION

1 Listen and practice.

A: Hello.
B: Hi. I'm calling about the car for sale.
A: Yes, what would you like to know?
B: Well, what kind is it?
A: It's a Toyota Celica.
B: And how old is it?
A: It's about four years old.
B: Oh. How much do you want for it?
A: $5,200.
B: Mmm. I think I'd like to see it. Is 8 o'clock OK?
A: Yes, that's fine. My address is 139 King Street, Apartment 4.
B: OK, thanks a lot. See you later. Bye!
A: Bye.

2 *Pair work* Now take turns calling about the things below.

GARAGE SALE!

CD player *refrigerator*
camera *motorcycle*

Call 521-6871

Useful expressions

What kind is it? How old is it?
It's a Honda. It's new.
It's a Kodak. It's about six months old.

11 LISTENING

Three people are calling about things for sale. Complete the missing information.

Richards 1996

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APPENDIX B

Questionnaire

1. Is intonation choice in English something you wish to study more than you have recently?

Student Answers:

No.

No.

I want to try to study what we are studying at the present. Later I want to progress to more difficult material.

2. Do you agree that it is worth spending at least some time on intonation?

Yes, I agree strongly. Two students marked this choice

Yes, I agree. One student marked this choice

No, I disagree.

No, I disagree strongly.

3. Do you wish to practice your own intonation use in class?

a) With the teacher and other students? Two students marked this choice

b) With other students? One student marked this choice

c) With a cassette recorder outside of class?

4. Can you think of any other skill, activity, or strategy that we should spend more time on in class?

Student Answers:

Speaking and listening. I do not have those abilities I think. They are difficult.

Reading. If I do not understand the road signs then I will be in trouble.

Speaking. Usually in high school it is only English. We don't have an opportunity to speak English.

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